



BRIDGING CULTURAL BARRIERS THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Among the clusters of the human race segregated by geographical boundaries, the strongest link which ties all beings is the child. A child is a child, whether he belongs to the scientifically advanced societies of countries like America, France, Germany or Britain, communist republics of U.S.S.R., China or less advanced societies of Maoris, Samoan or African Zulus. Everywhere, childhood is characterised by stages of growth common to universal demands for love and security, and aspirations for maturity. Like these basic growth-needs, the need for information, learning and knowledge is as much the right of a child as it is the responsibility of the adult. Today, the print and the electronic media have become the vehicles of extending information, leading to better understanding of the social ethos, philosophies and histories of various social groups.

In this media-rich environment, a marked discrepancy occurs in the dissemination of knowledge at the information seeking stage among the advanced countries as com-

pared to the developing countries. While children in one part of the world are witnessing rocket launchings, fiddling with computers, studying about satellites, robotics and aliens, their counterparts in another part have not known schools and blackboards. The cognitive faculties of such children, their reasoning and ability to analyse and their creative powers are nipped in the bud, at the very outset. It is indeed sad that when superconductivity is accelerating modernism and the process of science is exploring the unknown frontiers of space, a large population of the world is still struggling to attain basic literacy. They deserve our concern, and they require our support. The thrust extends from the under-privileged to the literate, literate to knowledgeable and further on to the specialists in the field of learning. The matter needs to be dealt not with an attitude of charity but rather with a sense of duty and service towards those from whom we have borrowed our future.

In the global perspective, the role of the

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developed countries assumes significance. Their responsibility to provide for the hungry minds becomes greater, because they are privileged in terms of resources and the distinction of the third world and the fourth world has been made purely on economic grounds.

Books are, in fact, the real basic tool for filling the ever widening chasm of ignorance regarding new discoveries and advances in knowledge. Good books provide the analysis, understanding and evaluation of the complexities of our social and physical environment and our own place within that framework.

The need for establishing links and co-operation between the developed and the developing countries for promotion of children's literature emerges from a deep-seated social consciousness. It is a two-way process which is mutually beneficial. A healthy cooperation would enable the developed and developing nations

- to exchange information
- to disseminate knowledge and technology
- to bridge cultural barriers
- to develop understanding and appreciation for people of different origins
- to inculcate a global perspective in the impressionable minds
- to share the thoughts and dreams of other people
- to weed out ethnic prejudices and racism in societies
- to create peace and a healthier world order.

Books are carriers of the culture of a people. As our late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru rightly said to a group of youngsters, "... when you have read them (books) you shall see many windows of your mind have opened. If you look through the windows towards the wider world, you will have a lot of fun." Literature for children also tells young people something about the everyday existence of people of a

particular culture the thoughts, dreams and aspirations of the people. Among children, it helps clarify the bias of ethnocentrism, racism and encourages realistic acceptance of a particular country and its people. To achieve these ideals I insist on constructing exchange programmes.

Speaking for ourselves, India has much to offer in turn. On the one hand, is the traditional literature which is being constantly written and re-written. *Panchtantra*, *Jataka Tales* and a vast repertory of fables and legends handed down by oral tradition store a wealth of enchantment, wonder and values. The epic story of Ram has survived the passage of generations. The power-struggle, family-feuds, rivalry as depicted in the *Mahabharata* are so real psychologically that even today the *Mahabharata* lives on in some measure. Although our traditional literature is as gripping and interesting as any folklore in any part of the world, it is not commonly known in other countries. Here children have grown up with Cinderella, Peter Pan and Goldilocks.

But today, India is not mere kings, queens, black magic, jungles, deprivation and poverty. The modern children's literature mirrors the developing nation leaping ahead to experiment in the frozen regions of Antarctica on this planet and launching satellites in outer space. Modern creative literature is very Indian to the core. Swami, the hero of *Swami and his Friends* does not sit in his private bathing tub. Rather, he enjoys a dip in the village pond or comes out to soak himself in the rain like a true Indian village boy. Adventures are woven around missing secret documents, fake currency power stealing in small villages, even rackets in forged passports. Faster Fenay, the swift young detective, Professor Shonku who encounters strange aliens, computer wizard Anshuman, Sarika's gang in search of family jewels of the Indian children's books are as alive and kicking as the famous five of Britain or Dunno of Soviet chil-

dren's literature. An exposure to Phukan's Sarika's, Anshuman's world beyond the boundaries of this land would certainly correct the image of our land and people in the minds of those children of the advanced countries who still enquire, "Do children in India go to school on elephant back?" Crossing racial barriers, overcoming geographical constraints, the characters of fiction for children would go a long way to nurture the feeling of universal brotherhood from the developing stage.

EXPOSURE THROUGH TRANSLATIONS

As a result of British domination over India for nearly two hundred years, the English language has stayed on almost as the second language next to the mother tongue. Children's books have flowed in, thus constituting a major segment of children's literature in the country. The Ladybird Series, Hamlyn and McMillan publications line the stalls in the book shops. The very small percentage of the literate population has acquainted itself with unfamiliar people—Jack, Ann, Mary—and unknown places — Broadford, Straffordshire, Southampton.

In contrast, the translated literature from Russia caters to the Hindi speaking majority. The flow of books, however, is one-way. Even though there is no substitute for children's literature in a child's own mother tongue, good translations of good books are perhaps the easiest method of exposing children of a country to another culture group. The major consideration in this area is the proper selection of titles and choice of translators. Both could be left to the discretion of governmental and voluntary agencies working to promote children's books for better results. A comprehensive list of best books would be readily available with these agencies. Translators of the same nationality as that of the original work would be able to main-

tain the essence of the culture which a foreigner may tend to overlook. Translators act as ambassadors of the people of a country.

EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES

A well-defined programme of exchange of literature and creators of literature would further the idea of cooperation between developed nations and the third world. The matter requires objective thinking. Primarily, an inflow of good books is as significant as export of our own books to bring about mutual understanding and appreciation. All those associated with the production of books—authors, illustrators, book-designers, publishers, print technologists—as a group, are best suited to construct a strategy of exchange programmes. Hence, interaction of experts is fundamental to promote exchange of knowledge, literature and culture through books.

BOOK-BANKS

Initially, the development of an international chain of book-banks needs to be considered. To begin with, the member countries willing to join hands for establishing book-banks can start the process by a mutual exchange of books. These book-banks should be comprised of the best books of each country and expand gradually in size with the growth of membership in this project. The book-bank should become the reservoir of the best fiction, non-fiction, science-fiction and information books of varied in styles, presentation and environment.

The functioning and expansion of book-banks could be entrusted to organisations and agencies involved in promoting children's literature. Management would be the responsibility of the respective country with finances allocated for functioning. Obviously, such a project is not capable of generating funds, and therefore, it has to be supported by a corpus fund, especially

in a developing country. In this matter, the advanced nations have to step forward.

The advantages ensuing from book-banks would benefit both readers and creators of children's literature. Authors, artists and publishers would have easy access to the best literature of the world, which would help them keep pace with modern trends. Above all, the book-banks, truly, a treasure-house of cultures, could sell the ideals and values of one nation to another through the charms of children's books.

It is imperative that dream merchants also meet and undergo a process of exposure, understanding and appreciation of one another. A regular two-way stream of writers, artists and publishers need to interact to promote better books. As for the writer and the artist, it is matter of great pride to see children of a foreign land read his work. For their self-education, writers and publishers would like to learn about the impact of their books. Their participation in workshops, training programmes, conferences, seminars would help to generate an atmosphere of learning and understanding. Research and technical information is essential to growth.

At this stage, I would emphasize that there is no substitute for the indigenous literature for children. It lays a firm foundation for future progress. Adaptation is not the solution. It is creation that is lasting and effective. However, acquaintance with other worlds could open up new roads to exposure for the imaginative mind, for the improved presentation of his dreams.

Book-exhibitions and expositions of original art-work of artists are necessary for establishing cooperation. They not only expose creative intelligentsia but also provide a glimpse into the culture of a nation at a glance.

ROLE OF THE DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

The developed countries are at an advantage in terms of resources both technical and financial. Hence, expectations of the developing countries thrust additional responsibility on them, even for initiating further cooperation. For the translation programmes, setting up book-banks, book exhibitions and exchange of experts, as suggested earlier, the developed countries need to take the first step forward. Very often, delegations going abroad are forced to shelve their programmes, because though the government may lend support to the extent of providing a travel grant, the real constraint is meeting expenses in a foreign land. The enormous disparity in the exchange rate of currency worries the delegate, if at all he manages to go abroad. If local hospitality is provided the delegates from developing nations could achieve the maximum gains from these meetings instead of counting their pennies all the time.

JOINT VENTURES

In order to strengthen links between developed and developing nations, promotion of joint ventures in the field of children's literature would be a major thrust in this area. Schemes for collaboration could cover all aspects of the book industry from preparation of the book, designing, artwork, to co-publishing and distribution. With the intention of fulfilling the objective of transmitting the life-styles, dreams and ideals of one people to another, it becomes necessary to consider writing assignments and their translations for presenting the right image of the country. Books, both fiction and non-fiction, should be planned to promote understanding.

In such a scheme, a writer of a given country could best portray the true image of his nation for he is an integral part of the environment. The descriptions would

roll out naturally, without artificiality and strain. Involvement of the artists is required for authentic depiction of the setting, attitudes, and features of a people in his illustrations. While glancing through a French translation of Satyajit Ray's stories for children, I was struck by its inappropriate cover—a Mughal miniature showing an elephant. The cover had absolutely no relevance to the matter inside the book. It merely suggested that the book had something to do with India.

Finally, co-publishing would add a significant aspect to the cooperation which could be mutually beneficial. It cannot be denied that a book enjoyed by children in one part of the world would certainly be relished by their counterparts in another part, because it must contain the essential goodness of childhood. To reach a wider audience, co-publishing programmes are an easy answer and also a welcome proposal to promote cooperation.

The developing countries look upon the developed countries for the funding of such publishing projects. The advanced countries have already extended a helping hand in health and nutrition programmes of the third world. It is time literacy through literature assumes significance in aid programmes for the developing nations. In a world exploding with knowledge, food for the mind has become an absolute necessity. This does not indicate that the developing countries can shirk responsibility. They have an equally significant role to play. Identification of talent, functioning and management of joint ventures could be taken care of by voluntary organisations already working in this direction. The compensation against financial assistance of developed countries is met through creative contribution of the developing nations.

Many research programmes for the growth of children's literature could be introduced where both the developed and the developing countries can function

jointly. Impact of literature from other countries, depiction of the third world in literature of the developed countries, cross-cultural studies of children's books, comparative studies of trends in literature for children would help students of children's literature. By utilising their resources, the developed nations could encourage research, invite and support scholars and finally publish research reports for the enrichment of information and necessary feed-back.

A step forward has already been taken to bring together the developed and developing countries in the field of children's books in Asia. The Asian Cultural Centre for Unesco (ACCU) in Japan organises training programmes for authors, translators, illustrators, librarians and publishers for raising the standard of children's books. The ACCU, during the last few years, has produced books representing literature from many Asian countries and is constantly assigning projects to assimilate the cultural aspect of each of the Asian countries through stories for children. The Noma Concours award for illustrations for children's books sponsored by the ACCU has acquired a prestigious stature, which every illustrator aspires for. The ACCU programmes for the development of reading habit, book production, translations, workshops for writers and illustrators aim at better books for children.

The Third World Children's Book Fund is another such organisation of a developed country interested in projecting the correct image of the Third World in their own lands. By encouraging good books on a given theme, they endeavour to fight unhealthy human attitudes of racism and ethnic prejudices.

The reality of the global village, the ideal of universal brotherhood, an aspiration for peaceful co-existence are not far-fetched, especially when the idea develops as the child grows. The efforts of some organisa-

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tions which have declared the objective of establishing links between the developed and developing countries are not just hypothetical, but out and out a practical proposition. In India, the need for abundant literature for children has prompted some individuals and voluntary agencies to promote good books and they function amidst financial constraints and limited resources. Strengthening the ties between the developed and developing countries in the field

of children's book is only an expansion of their objectives in the larger interest of the world community of children. If the developed nations step up the promotional ventures for better books for children, the extended arm of cooperation, particularly from organisations like the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, will always be there to greet them. Together, they would go side by side, bridging cultural barriers for better international understanding.